

Ex-policeman faces new dangers while at sea

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By Ed Levitt
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LAFAYETTE — Don Verley spent 26 years as an Oakland police officer, facing danger every day.

"I'm still on a hazardous mission," he says.

Verley sails around the world on a 50-foot ketch.

"As a cop," he says, "I once took a gun from a bank robber. He was pointing it at me.

"But as a sea captain, I faced a whale and a hurricane."

The former homicide inspector and his friend, Bonnie Russell, recently were sailing in the Mediterranean when they spotted a killer whale alongside their boat.

"He just played around, zooming underneath, rolling over, looking up. He seemed to be studying us the way we were studying him," Verley says.

"I found it intriguing — both parties trying to figure out the other's move. He finally took off, leaving a trail of foam."

What surprised the sailor from Lafayette more than seeing a whale was not seeing any fish in the Mediterranean.

"That was the biggest disappointment of the trip," he says.

Eastbay PEOPLE

"I thought the Mediterranean would be wide-open for fishing.

"But the world's oldest and biggest fishing hole is now fished out. All we caught was a cold."

Verley traveled 7,000 miles, visited 10 countries and discovered skippering a 50-foot boat keeps you too busy to get bored.

"I took along 200 books," he says, "and never read a page."

Sailing through the English Channel, around France and into the Mediterranean proved one of the biggest challenges of his life.

"While working as a cop," he says, "I never dreamed I would one day sail to Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia. I saw a city in Turkey that was 4,000 years old — all built out of marble.

"I learned the viewpoint of people on the other side of the world. Their opinions of Americans are so varied — from strong prejudice to absolute love. The love is from Turkey, the negativeness from Greece."

Verley enjoyed boats and the

water since he was a kid.

"But at 58," he says, "I still get seasick everytime I go out."

In 1982, after quitting the force, he borrowed a boat from a friend and set sail for Mexico.

"Bonnie and I left San Francisco on Sept. 2 and arrived Dec. 6 at Baja — only to be greeted by a hurricane," Verley recalls.

"Twenty-eight boats were lost, hurled onto the beach. Our craft also was flung ashore and buried in the sand."

Don and Bonnie were stranded in Mexico. "We had no money, no passports, no residence. All we had was what we wore — T-shirts and shorts," Verley says.

"The Mexican authorities told us we had to stay, along with the other boat captains, until the beach was cleared of debris. It took us two weeks to clean the mess. Meanwhile, we lived at an American-owned condo till I got money from home to fly back."

The trauma failed to deter him from other sea adventures.

He was reading a magazine one day when he spotted an ad for a boat owned by a woman in Marin.

"I bought the boat," Verley says. "But I had to go to the coast of France to pick it up."

The craft had all the convenience of home — "except a washing machine. We went on to sail to England, Holland, Scotland, Belgium, France, Spain. We finally left the boat last year in Portugal and returned to the Eastbay for Christmas."

Russell and Verley went back in March to pick up the boat.

"We sailed throughout the Mediterranean, stopping off at the various countries along the way," Verley says.

"Visiting Yugoslavia, a country that is not considered a tourist attraction, was a revelation. The place is gorgeous. Looking from the sea, Yugoslavia resembles the California coastline."

He stayed out at sea eight months, returning in October.

"We never spent more than six nights on the boat without going ashore. I never tired of the weather. But I got tired of the weather, especially the storms."

The toughest part of living on a boat is the confinement.

"Living close to someone for 24 hours a day is a true test of compatibility," Verley says.

"And Bonnie and I are still very close."